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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [FI](#) [EU](#)

SUBJECT: CHARGE'S MEETING WITH FINNISH PRIME MINISTER

REF: THOME-EUR/NB E-MAIL 28 NOVEMBER 2005

Classified By: CDA Amy Hyatt for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (S) Summary: Prime Minister Vanhanen and Charge reviewed several issues of interest to the U.S. and Finland Nov. 25. Vanhanen raised the issue of an alleged CIA flight through Finland about which the GOF has faced heavy political and press criticism. He also discussed the current presidential campaign and his relationship with President Halonen; the parliamentary elections of 2007; trade with China; his hopes for Finland's upcoming EU presidency; the stalled crisis management legislation; and his perceptions of Finnish-US relations and of the U.S. image in Europe. Charge welcomed the PM's effort to address openly the range of issues that affect our bilateral relationship and offered continued U.S. support and cooperation in areas of shared concern.  
End Summary.

2. (SBU) Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and Charge met Nov. 25 for 90 minutes at Vanhanen's official residence, at the PM's request. Vanhanen characterized the meeting as informal and explained that he makes a habit of reviewing bilateral issues with the U.S. chief of mission "every couple of months or so" -- a practice he only engages in with the U.S., given the great importance he personally attaches to the relationship. The conversation covered several bilateral and regional issues of concern to both countries. Vanhanen also spoke candidly and at length about the Parliament's rejection of his government's crisis management operation (CMO) defense bill (septel).

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ALLEGED CIA RENDITION FLIGHT IN FINLAND  
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3. (S) Vanhanen raised the issue of an alleged CIA flight that supposedly landed in Helsinki on May 16, 2003 and then proceeded to Stockholm (reftel A). Vanhanen noted that the issue has generated significant, embarrassing coverage in the Finnish press and that opposition politicians have attacked the GOF and demanded clarification. He said that initially the Finnish MOD could find no record of having approved the flight -- an unfortunate development that prompted even greater criticism and allegations that the U.S. was using Finnish airspace illegally. However, he noted with some relief, the MOD subsequently found the authorization and would so inform the press. Vanhanen did not pressure the Charge for information, but made it clear that any information we can eventually provide would be helpful. In accordance with existing guidance, Charge responded that the Embassy can confirm or deny nothing on this issue, but that we would seek to be helpful when and if information became available.

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CAMPAIGNS, AND RELATIONS WITH THE PRESIDENT  
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4. (SBU) Vanhanen confirmed what many have observed about Finland's presidential campaign: that there really are few significant policy differences among the major party candidates. He acknowledged that Conservative Party (CON) candidate Sauli Niinisto has sought to distance himself from Vanhanen on security policy, and has scored some political points through that effort. However, the PM added, Niinisto's view may indicate that he is either getting bad campaign advice or "just doesn't understand" the GOF's position on security policy. Vanhanen also said that he and President Halonen differ on tax policy, with the President generally favoring higher rates.

5. (SBU) Concerning Halonen, Vanhanen told Charge he is proud of the fact that Finns from across the political spectrum have applauded the outstanding working relationship between the two of them. Their cooperation has resulted in Vanhanen's attaining the highest public approval rating ever for a Finnish prime minister (currently 55 percent), despite a recent drop as a result of the presidential campaign. Vanhanen cited his own negotiation and compromise skills as crucial in dealing effectively with a strong president who has been forceful about pushing the limits of her own constitutional mandates. Acknowledging that his good role as prime minister has, in fact, probably hurt his ability to campaign aggressively as a presidential candidate, Vanhanen said, "It is more important to run a government well than to score points in an election." (Vanhanen has, in fact, fallen to third behind Halonen and Niinisto in recent polls.)

Nevertheless, looking forward to next year's parliamentary election, the PM said that voters will look back and value his low profile and strong management skills, and reward his Center Party (CEN) accordingly.

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CHINA AND THE EU PRESIDENCY  
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16. (SBU) The PM briefly touched on several other issues. Regarding Finland's growing trade with China and his recent visit there, Vanhanen said that "keeping a balance" is crucial to Finnish interests. The lure of inexpensive Chinese exports is attractive to any nation's consumers, he suggested, but the GOF and the Finnish private sector remain convinced that Finland is capable of selling high tech and other products to China in almost equal measure to what it imports. He hinted that, over the long term, he would probably favor lifting the China arms embargo, but emphasized that he fully understands how important this issue is to the USG and therefore does not intend to act on it now or during the Finnish EU presidency. Indeed, he said, Finland has an aggressive agenda for its EU presidency and hopes for no natural disasters or other crises "on Finland's watch." Nevertheless, the GOF is actively preparing for any eventuality. As part of its preparations, Vanhanen hopes to consult closely with all major non-EU heads of government (US, Russia, China, etc.) in an effort to incorporate their views and priorities, to the extent possible, in the Presidency's agenda and to establish a working relationship that can be tapped in the event of future crises. Recognizing this as a clear hint that Vanhanen would like to meet President Bush sometime before Finland assumes the EU presidency in July, Charge reminded the PM that we expected no more than one presidential meeting in 2006 for Finland and would leave it up to Finland to decide whether its PM or the President would participate.

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COMMENT  
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17. (S) This one-on-one meeting with the Prime Minister demonstrates the importance the GOF places on maintaining a meaningful dialogue with the US. In general, he was forthcoming on political and strategic issues; realistic and honest about his campaign prospects; and very positive about the overall tone and substance of the US-Finnish bilateral relationship. On the rendition flight issue, which has become quite sensitive for the Vanhanen government as well, he made clear that he was raising it not to challenge us but rather in hopes of resolving it in a manner that limits damage for both sides.

HYATT